

DEDICATION

Dedicated to all those people all around the world who have given up their lives unable to cope with the financial difficulties that they had to face after the outbreak of-and also all those who had to suffer loss of their livelihoods – the Covid-19 virus!

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Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Hemlataa is a novella based on the real incidents of a couple. The names and addresses of all the people associated with this story and also, the climax of the story itself is changed and twisted to maintain their secrecy and save them from humiliation. Hemlataa is a book of human weakness, intrigue, romance, suspense and revenge.

Hemlataa was leisurely pacing, herself across her first-floor veranda. Her husband Hemanta was getting ready to open their shop in the absence of their salesman Prasanta H. Her son had gone to school. The morning was fully advanced by then. Now and then her eyes would drift towards the house opposite hers but she controlled her gaze lest some neighbour spot her. She was a little fat but she had tidied herself that day and also wore some flowers on the bun of hair in her head to look younger. An eagerness and excitement would be seen on her face. She was waiting for Ananda K. who lived in the house opposite hers. But she was completely different earlier, both physically and behaviouristically before her marriage to hemanta, her husband some years earlier. She was born in a village near her husband's home to an agricultural family. Her father was a poor agriculturist who tilled the lands to make both ends meet. The grain from their fields carried them throughout the year while her father also worked in the nearby town, when there was no tilling to be done, as a daily-wage-earner to earn an income while her mother worked in her handloom and produced locally weaved towels and women's dresses and in this way also contributed to the family exchequer. She had a younger brother as her sibling also. So as her family was poor, she and her brother, when they grew up, also began to work in the fields to lend a hand to their parents during the paddy season as their parents can ill-afford to hire paid labourers. This made Hemlataa (and her brother also) robust, strong and stout in body as well as highly laborious. In addition to that Hemlataa was fair and beautiful also. And although they were poor financially, her father took all pains to make her and her brother educated. So he sacrificed everything he could and made Hemlataa and her brother pass their graduation in due time. And it was during her last year in her degree course that her marriage proposal from Hemanta B. (to whom she was married) came.

Hemanta was the eldest son of his parents. He had a younger sister as his sibling. At the time of his marrying Hemlataaa, he was living in the town some sixteen kilometres distant from Hemlataaa's village. His father had worked in the army and had retired voluntarily through the VRS* when about five years of service was left in him. As his father was in the armed forces which required constant movement from one place to another, his father kept his family in their ancestral village home some five km. distant from the town. So like Hemlataaa, it can be said that Hemanta and his sister grew up in the village and from where they completed their matriculations. As Hemanta was not being good at his studies, so after his matriculation, decided to study electricity in the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in another town located some fifty kilometres distant from his and whose climate was contrarily very bracing than the climate of his home-town. This course required his two years of stay in this town. Now Hemanta, after he became an adult, had been experiencing a high level of libido which was unusual in many boys of his age. Perhaps it was due to his being born in a hill station in Northern India (his father was stationed in that station at that time) or, his passing of two years after his matriculation in the nearby town-he couldn't say. But he had really experienced it, to be sure. At the time of Hemanta's passing out of this institute and his father's having crossed his fifty-fifth year and unwilling to serve his country further, retired voluntarily from service. Prior to his father's VRS two of Hemanta's Uncles from his father's side had bought a large plot of land in the town

at throwaway prices. Hemanta's father decided to settle in a corner of this land and so from a portion of the money he had received on his retirement, he built an Assam type masonry house and moved his family to this house. Now, although Hemanta's father was a pensioner and so living in the town didn't seem too difficult for them even then, Hemanta thought of doing something on his own as well as apply for posts of electrician in any Govt. or private enterprises. During that time one of the cousins of Hemanta who lived nearby in the town and who was elder to hemanta by some years and had also passed the ITI as an electrician and who was operating a small grocery shop beside the main intersection of his neighbourhood had found employment as an electrician in the largest public sector Undertaking (PSU) of the Govt. in the crude oil sector. This made him close the shop as he was fatherless and without any male sibling. When Hemanta heard of this, he took some money from his father and bought the shop at a throwaway price. During those days, the communication system in India was not up to the mark and people had to rely on public call offices or simply PCOs to make *Voluntary Retirement Scheme.

Calls to others. This was in a way a great business! Hemanta was clever and had great business acumen, in addition to his high ardour. The shop was spacious and so Hemanta thought of utilising the rear portion of his shop as cabins for phoning while he kept another phase openly on the sales dashboard of the shop for undertaking local calls. In a few months time Hemanta's shop was the most talked about shop in his locality where people can phone and also buy essentials. In addition to that Hemanta also added brewed tea to his list of items sold and so people came to his shop, if not for any shopping then, for a cup of tea also. In a couple of years, Hemanta was able to return all the money he had taken from his father for opening the shop. And after some years more, he also managed to marry off his younger sister to a respectable school teacher from a nearby village. In this way for a good number of years, Hemanta conducted his shop keeping business and when occasions arose, would appear in the interviews of companies that required electricians. But

after a couple of years of marrying off his sister he had to switch business for reasons which will be discussed later.

Ten years passed quickly in this way and Hemanta was nearing his thirtieth birthday and very well into marriageable age. After his sister was married off a few years previously and as his years were catching on with no chance of any good recruitment, his parents pressurized him into marriage. Hemanta, as he was the only male child of his bucolic parents didn't (and couldn't) wish to say 'no' to his parents' advise of marriage. But he was also in a fix as to if he should marry by his parents' wishes or otherwise.

Diti G. was a naive, innocent girl of eighteen years when she first met Hemanta. She lived in the same town as Hemanta, in a quarter provided by the employer of her father about three hundred meters up the road from Hemanta's shop. Her father worked as a foreman in the state electricity department. She had three siblings, one elder brother and two younger sisters. Her elder brother had graduated and was unemployed and so would roam about the streets to literally 'kill his time'. In this way he had, after Hemanta had bought his shop become acquainted with him and thus would pass the evening in his shop,

occasionally drinking a tea or smoking a cigarette or even, making a phone call. But Hemanta was too clever to let Diti's elder brother use his shop as a gossiping and smoking hub and so asked Diti's brother to bring his parents and friends to his shop as customers of his PCO. He even gave his three phone numbers to be used by them as 'connection numbers' if one wanted to send them any information. This brought Diti's family into direct contact with Hemanta. As Diti was growing up and was in her final year of her higher secondary course, she required phone numbers to be sent to her friends to receive information from them. Hemanta used this opportunity to seduce her. As said earlier, Hemanta had a very high libido from his childhood which only turned to lust as he grew up. He saw promise in Diti's fine youthful frame and also in her innocent eyes. So he offered his love to her. Naive Diti did not comprehend the inner motives of Hemanta and so swallowed his bait of love. In a few days, they were heels over head in love. After some months of their love, Hemanta thought of seducing Diti to give a vent to his lustful instincts. So he began to entice Diti by taking her to restaurants when she would be returning from college by waiting for her near the college gates and then offering her a ride home on his scooter. A hungry and tired Diti would only relish those free tea-and-snacks and enjoy those free rides home. On those occasions, Hemanta would close his shop for an hour or more to spend time with Diti. After some months of the commencement of their love, Diti's elder brother got wind of their affair. But he said nothing to Diti or Hemanta because Hemanta belonged to the general (caste) category while Diti's family was in the backwards caste community. First it was Diti's elder brother, then the shopkeepers near Hemanta's shop and then finally their whole neighbourhood who came to know of their love affair. Hemanta of course didn't mind because he knew it would only support his sinister designs later. Then for about a month, there was a lull in their love as Diti had to stay indoors for her senior secondary finals. But after these were over, it was resumed with full vigour. At that time, it was also necessary for Diti to communicate with her friends to know about their decisions regarding the selection of

colleges they will be enrolling into after passing their secondary exams-hemanta took this opportunity and give Diti his full support to receive her friends' calls by sending a message of attendance in his PCO at a time chosen by her caller-friends. This only mellowed Diti's attitude towards him more. After the results were out and Diti found herself placed in the second division, she decided to get enrolled in the local girls' college-which meant her love-affair with Hemanta will also continue. And truly it again resumed with full vigour. At first hemanta suggested to her physical love and Diti, although reluctant at first, took the bait to 'have a taste of it' (literally). Her naivety as well as Hemanta's coercion was the reason of her taking that bait. After they were into this light physical relationship, Hemanta proposed intercourse for her. Diti at once turned down the offer saying that her love with Hemanta was light compared to such indecent acts proposed by him. She also warned Hemanta not to broach that subject again to her in the near future. Of course she was content with the love he was giving her and also, the outward physical pleasures he was giving her, she told him. But Hemanta was not such a young man to be put off that easily. He wanted a safe release of his lustful instincts and he knew that Diti shall be that release. He bid his time!

During that time in the telecom sector of India, an unprecedented situation happened which ushered in the betterment of the citizens of India while contrarily, spelling a doom for the Commercial Telephone Service Providers. In a swift and singular move, the Govt. of India took off all restrictions imposed till then in possessing mobile phones and opened the floodgates of outside network service providers into India to conduct Mobile Telephone Service. This acted as a big blow to the PCOs as they saw an alarming drop in their customers as only those who were in need of the use of Subscriber Trunk Dialling facility (STD) came to use the PCOs. Hemanta also saw a huge drop in his shop customers because most of his customers were of a dual type meaning that they would come to make phone calls as well as have a tea and also buy some groceries. This rattled Hemanta! He began to search for avenues elsewhere to

increase his income. During that time the energy department of the state government was also deliberating the idea of removing the old, analogue type of electric meters and installing electronic meters in all the electrified buildings of the town. Hemanta had also heard about this through Dudu, the elder brother of Diti. At first, he did not pay much heed to that information. But after he found his income crashing down (due to the changes in the telecom sector) he began to rethink about it. So clever Hemanta approached Diti to persuade her father to allot the new electronic meter fitting contract to him! At first Diti was reluctant to talk about it to her father as he may suspect something between her and Hemanta. But in such road-block-scenarios, clever Hemanta has always an ace up his sleeve. He mooted his marriage with Diti in the near future if he may be able to obtain that contract from the state Electricity board for his town, as he will be always finding customers every year and so will have no difficulty in his financial conditions later. This time Diti took the bait! Her father who was of a little humane disposition, talked with the Chief Engineer about it and so decided to award the contract to Hemanta. So after about a month, Hemanta found time to open his shop only in the evenings and, on Sundays when he would absent himself from work. On all working days, during the day time, he would be in the work sites, supervising the installations of the new meters by the men appointed by him. For some six months, he couldn't make out the profits from the expenditure and he found himself busy six days a week and only paying out, either to his workers or, to the distributors who sold the meters and accessories. But after that period, he saw a steady rise in his income. Firstly, it was hardly differentiating; but as the weeks went by, he could see that he was making profits in this field too; in fact more than he had been making during his hay days of the PCO business. This brought some solace to him as well as made him bolder in his love with Diti. He wanted exploration and enjoyment. As his works required him to move about carrying electrical meters for installations, he decided to buy a second hand Maruti Van in which spacious interior he could gather the meters to be taken to the various sites. But this vehicle also helped him

to scheme his plot of seducing Diti. Naturally, Diti was joyed when she knew that Hemanta, her lover, had bought a car. Cunning Hemanta took his chance in her jubilation and proposed rides in his new car on Sunday afternoons, lasting till the evening, to the outskirts of the town. During their such ventures, they would stop their van in a segregated stretch of the road and become engrossed in their oral and physical love and pleasures. After a couple of weeks of their such outings Hemanta again broached the subject of intercourse, this time saying that as he has found financial stability now and as his such incomes rests entirely on the hands of Diti's father (remember it was he who granted the contracts to Hemanta?), his marrying her is certain and so she has nothing to fear. He also told her how modern contraceptives are hundred percent successful in blocking any unwanted pregnancy and so she has no fear from this angle too. And as he would be marrying her, he sees no reason why they shouldn't be united before their marriage. This time Diti took the plunge. So from the next Sunday onwards, after her acceding to Hemanta's such requests, Hemanta and Diti began to take part in this pre-marital, immoral and illegal activity. For this purpose, Hemanta would book hotels inside the town and also at roadside inns and resorts outside it while all the time declaring his commitment to marry her. And Diti was only floating in her dream of being married to Hemanta!

So this was the situation which caused Hemanta to step back one step when his marriage was brought up by his parents. But he thought of a way out of this dilemma as he couldn't leave his contracts by not marrying Diti. He wanted his contracts to continue as well as handing Diti over (in marriage) to another person. He began to scheme. But first he has to tell Diti, he told himself. He knew Diti would become violent, even expose Hemanta before his parents and his relatives living near his house. But he has to take that risk. 'Better a Volcano now than an earthquake later!' he thought. So on a Sunday instead of choosing a room for a luncheon and a cha-cha-cha followed by a rest-as was the 'modus operandi' from the start of his seduction of Diti, he called her to his shop in the afternoon and took her by his scooter to a restaurant known for its

frequenting by the rich and the educated elite of the town. Its sweets and its tea were also very good. But Hemanta has chosen this restaurant for its habitués only and not for its taste of food for reasons best known to him. After a little waiting they found a table just beside the entrance to the hotel. It suited Hemanta very much! To prolong the time, he first ordered lassi* and a sweetmeat each. Then he ordered salted items supplemented by curries of peas. When this was over, he ordered a variety of sweets followed by teas. It was at this stage that he brought the subject of his marriage. As he had anticipated, Diti at once flared up but instantly controlled herself seeing the gentle, rich and educated *haut monde* gently conversing and partaking their food including some female professors of her college. But even then firmly and with a tone of indignation in her voice, she said that she cannot let Hemanta leave her as they are now too much rooted in their love. Hemanta agreed but also said that he has to obey the wishes of his parents, especially his mother. To which Diti replied: “why didn’t you ask her permission before loving me and also before taking me to those road-side hotels and resorts?” Hemanta asked her if that was possible and advised her to bear with the situation. “But why don’t you ask your parents to bear me?” diti asked, keeping her voice low. “You people like to play with the honour of a woman and then dump her as and when you will,” she said.

Hemanta: “But I will still love you; I guarantee you that.” Upon saying this, he saw a smile escape her lips and her face mellowed. No one spoke for some time. Hemanta continued eating while diti fumbled with hers. Presently she said; “I was thinking of starting a family with you. I didn’t know beforehand that you had sinister designs. You may continue loving

* A sweet or salted and flavoured iced yogurt drink.

Me or not; I don’t mind. But do remember that without any warning, I may present myself and reveal all about our affairs to your parents and also to your wife, in the near future”. Saying thus, she continued to eat, this time un-fumblingly. “You can verily do so if I stop loving you anytime after my marriage”, said hemanta slyly. Diti didn’t show any reaction to that. For the remaining part of their food, they ate in silence. It was also

in silence that they returned home from the restaurant. As Hemanta dropped her near the intersection of her house to avoid prying eyes and eager questioners, hemanta said "I Love you"! But Diti walked away without saying a word. Hemanta felt a little light-hearted that day as he felt that he had revealed his possibility of marriage beforehand. But he realised that he wasn't free from the scorn of diti completely. Moreover, his marriage has some more months to fructify. So it would be best in his interest, he thought, if he should keep his illicit relationships with diti as he cannot afford to face the ire of her parents if she blows-up the lid to them. He has the contracts in her father's hands which have become the main source of income to him from about a year since. So as a continuation, he paid a visit to her parents at their quarter the next evening which was inside the boundary of the office of the electricity board although, he had met her father during work that day and had had a cup of tea with him together as well as, feel the pulse of diti. From their behaviour of him, he realised that diti hadn't told anything about their relationship to them. He heaved a sigh of relief. But he also needed to do something. He thought of another man who will become his substitute against diti but whom he could also make a decoy. He found a way out.

As had been mentioned earlier, after hemanta got the electrical-meter fitting contract, his shop would remain closed for the day and would be opened by him only in the evenings for an hour or two. So in a way he wasn't making any profit out of his shop but kept it only as another business as, to find a building to be used as a shop at another time is, difficult. But after he saw profits in his contracts and was able to return all his loans due, he decided to run his shop again full time. For this he needed a young salesman who can put in about ten hours of effort everyday in his shop. So to that end, he began to advertise for a salesman for his shop. In about a fortnight he found one.

Prasanta H. was a credulous, non-graduate young man of about twenty years of age. His father was from the riverine island of Majuli. His father had drifted as a young man following his profession of fisherman and came to the hometown of hemanta. Here, he prospered in his

profession of fisherman where he would take on lease the lakes and swamps from the Govt. and then sell the fish in it all the year round for profit. He made so much profit that after marrying Prasanta's mother, with whom he had fallen in love, he decided to stay in his place of business. So he bought a piece of land in a village bordering hemanta's town and settled with his wife in a small masonry house. Prasanta H. was born in that house. As prasanta's father had seen much hardship in his life, he didn't want his son to suffer the same hardships. He also decided to give prasanta a decent education so that he may, if luck smiled, get a good salaried job. So he enrolled prasanta into a good, convent, English medium missionary school of the town. Prasanta passed his school and intermediate examinations smoothly and enrolled himself in a local college for his graduation. But when he was in the first year of his graduation, tragedy struck his family. His father died suddenly of a cerebral stroke arising out of hypertension. As all of Prasanta's father's savings till that time had been spent on the land and on the house where they had been living, Prasanta's mother was left with no savings by which she could start a business of her own or, live on the interest accruing out of it. So prasanta, being the only son of his parents, had to shoulder the responsibilities of his family. But he was in a dilemma here. Till that time he hadn't learnt any technical skill to earn his livelihood through that skill. And as mentioned earlier, following his father's wishes, he didn't learn the skills of his father's profession also. So he decided to search for a job of a salesman in a shop. And to his dismay, due to the high unemployment condition prevailing in the country, he found that even this was hard to find. After searching for more than a fortnight, one of his acquaintances gave him hemanta's mobile number. At first hemanta's offer of Rupees three thousand per month (a handsome amount some fifteen years earlier) did not suit him. But, his complementary offer of one meal and two teas per day and the bankrupt condition of his home made him take that job.

Although keeping a salesman meant shelling out rupees three thousand every month, hemanta didn't mind because as his shop would

be opened on all days, this meant he can restart diti's conversations with her friends. True, the mobile phone had disabled the PCOs almost completely but, as they were till then new, their rates highly overpriced and, handsets not available and so very costly, only one phone was being used in a family. This meant if diti had to receive her friends' calls, no matter from where they called, she had to come to hemanta's PCO to receive them. This was closed from the day hemanta began his meter-fitting contracts; now this will be resumed as the shop will be open during the daytime and, females during those times liked to call mostly during the day. This enabled hemanta to be near her on all days except on Sundays as was earlier. He only has to introduce her to Prasanta H. for the cashless-calls she would be making to his mobile from his own PCO. And he had also other things in his mind. So one day when diti was coming home from college, he called her to his shop and introduced her to Prasanta H., his new salesman while asking Prasanta to record down and not charge any call diti would make to his mobile number from his PCO or buy from his shop anything for her. So, as these things were moving on in his business front, in his home front his marriage was also getting organised. And in a couple of months from his re-opening of shop for full time, hemanta married hemlataaa.

As stated earlier, much of hemanta's father's retirement money was spent on building their house. And hemanta, at the time of his marriage, had somehow returned to his parents the money he took from them for his stationery-cum-PCO business and also for his meter-fitting contracts. So he had to conduct his marriage as an unpretentious ceremony. Even then he invited more than fifty persons, mostly young, to accompany him as the groom for which he hired a large bus. Diti's family was also invited and given special preferences (because of his indebtedness to diti's father) while Prasanta H., his salesman at shop worked in his house for two days instead on the occasion of his marriage. And as a party to the groom, Diti's elder brother and one of her younger sister along with her were also invited. There was much fun and enjoyment inside that bus that night, both while going and also while

returning which made an indelible memory on Prasanta H.'s mind and also on Diti's mind. Prasanta had till then only known Diti as the sister of his employer's friend but on that night of his employer's wedding, he got to know her close by which brought him great satisfaction. Diti also enjoyed the occasion although her heart was with Hemanta and so thanked him for inviting her to accompany him as a party to the groom. But neither Diti nor Prasanta H. could comprehend or guess what lay in store for them together later in their lives originating from some hours of such enjoyment during Hemanta's wedding.

From the start, Hemlata carved a niche in Hemanta's household with her naive personality, crispy bearing, fair complexion and good looks; she quickly became the apple of the eye in Hemanta's family. Not only in Hemanta's family but even among his cousins who lived nearby Hemlata found she to be the darling of the young and old alike. Out of his love for her, Hemanta called her 'Hema' short for Hemlata and this name soon found favour among all. Due to her Arcadian birth and physique from which emanated boundless energy, she carried out all her household chores in her new house with utmost ease. And due to her growing up in a poor household, she quickly adjusted to the tight budgetary running of Hemanta's household, cutting off unnecessary items from the monthly expenditures of the household. And, both Hemanta and Hema went into family planning at once, Hemanta not having reached thirty years of age in his marriage while Hema not even of twenty one years. Thus the first year of their married life was purely blissful in that they enjoyed each other's company going here and there and everywhere together; watching films, shows and theatres, attending marriage and birthday parties, celebrating the various festivals and at the same time keeping themselves away from the burden of a baby. Hema had appeared in her graduation finals before her marriage and a few months after her marriage she was declared a graduate. This of course brought great pleasure to Hemanta and his family as no one in that household was a graduate till then (his sister was in the second year finals at the time of her marriage). And to add colour to the occasion, even in the electricity

board where hemanta had taken hema to show her the office of the board and introduce her to diti's father and other higher-ups to whom he was highly indebted for getting his meter installation contracts, everybody liked her and praised hemanta for choosing such a lovely and homely bride for himself. He even took hema to diti's house located in the electricity board's premises and introduced diti's elder brother as one of his intimate friends and diti and her sisters as like his own sisters. Naive hema of course couldn't detect anything between her husband and diti, which was also improbable and only invited her to their house as a sign of friendship. All in all naive hema found a very suitable life partner in hemanta after her marriage and a very rich and colourful married life in contrast to her birth and growing up as a village girl while hemanta, for all his bad thoughts and habits, found a naive and innocent wife in hema who fulfilled his every type of carnal wishes while at the same time continuing his love affair with diti.

But lucky hemanta's luck was not enhanced by hema in ways of satisfying his carnal instincts, invigorating him in his desire to undertake more contracts and attend social functions with her when for earlier such occasions, he didn't find the time or couldn't manage it. He was in for the greatest surprise of his life and what could change his lifestyle forever and also the lifestyle of his family. As said earlier, hemanta had been applying for jobs in addition to his business of shop keeping and meter-fitting contracts. But he hadn't been yet lucky enough to be chosen by any department, corporation or company. But when about ten months of his marriage had passed, an envelope was one day delivered to his house. It was from a Public Sector Oil Corporation, the largest in India, asking hemanta to report for an interview with the higher-ups in the Corporation, the date of which fell on the third day of receiving that letter. Results of that interview were declared online one hour after conduction of the interview and hemanta's joys knew no bounds when he saw his name in the list of the successful candidates. All the people in his family including hemanta and his relatives living nearby attributed this auspicious happening to the luck of hema. Hema herself was very

pleased and quite jubilant but she suppressed her jubilation and instead thanked God for the grace he had shown to her and her (new) family. The joining was of course about a month later and it was only from the third month that hemanta and his family began to perceive and also enjoy the fruits of his consistent and persevering efforts to get a government job. But one strong decision was taken by hemanta and his family at this stage-that their earlier effort of family planning was over (as they could now think of having children of their own).

When hemanta conveyed his news of being selected for a job to diti, his lover, she of course showed suppressed elation. This was understandable as she had imagined earlier that she would be that woman who would be enjoying the bounties of hemanta. Even then she congratulated hemanta and hoped that their love affair would continue even as hemanta would be away from the electricity board's offices (where her father worked) and so be free from that domain which kept him tethered to diti. Hemanta of course had already thought about it because after getting a Govt. job he cannot carry out contracts in his name. So he shifted his work to another person, a fellow of his town who earlier issued meter testing certificates for the electricity board. This person would work on the capital already invested by hemanta and after receiving the dividends, would give twenty percent of the profits to hemanta while invest the remaining eighty percent on the business.

To hema could be credited the good luck which visited hemanta's house after his marriage. The loss from the termination of the PCO business has already been stated. After working for some months in his new job, hemanta took a small loan from a bank and invested it on a Xerox machine and a laminator. This brought him dividends because people would now visit (not like they used to during the PCO days, of course) his shop for such works. This enabled him to pay Prasanta's wages and maintain his regular meals from the income of this shop.

So everything went on smoothly in this new setting. Hemanta's shop overcome the inertia which came naturally after the stoppage of the PCO business and showed some profits substantial to pay the rent, the

electricity bills and the wage of Prasanta along with the expenses of his keep. He supervised his second business of meter-fitting on Sundays and would also be receiving the twenty percent of dividend as arranged with his partner. Of course, what he had invested first as the venture capital had already been recovered and so although the present dividend was very small compared to what he would receive earlier, he was content with it because it was free. And when he would find the time he would on his scooter roam about with hema and go sight-seeing and also enjoy each other's company even outside their house. His duty had a schedule of two days duty followed by a day off and again for two days of duty with another day of off after that. And Sundays would always be off for him. During those four days of duty, he would be working for two days in a shift and two days in another shift. As the shifts were of twelve hours duration and the journey to his work site in the corporation's buses of more than three hours so on working days much of his time was spent on his job, from his going to it and till returning home. And so on the off-days he would be enjoying his outings with hema to the full which brought a sense of fullness not only to him but to hema also.

The employment of hemanta in a salaried job of course saw his termination of a pledge hemanta and hema had together taken after their marriage-that of family planning. Of course, hema was quite young, by modern standards, when she was married to hemanta but from hemanta's angle, it wasn't completely so because of her age or, of his either. He was a little intimidated by his financial conditions to increase the size of his family before getting his job as the payments of the electricity board were not regular and even unequal. But after getting the job, he became a little bolder and so cut short his family planning ideas and with hema advanced towards that goal. He was of course rewarded and after more than eighteen months of his marriage, hema one day broke to him the good news. Medical tests were presently carried out which confirmed her doubts and so another wish of hemanta came to be fulfilled after his marrying of hema. And to show his love and sincerity to hema, hemanta from that moment, hired a maid to do all the

household chores which were done by hema earlier and provided her the best medical facilities he could find in his town. But hema's pregnancy created a different problem for hemanta.

As said earlier hemanta was an ardent and salacious fellow from a young age. For the irrepressible condition of his passions, he had loved diti and had copulations with her and had maintained his love affair with her even after his marriage with hema. Surely, from his marriage to this time of hema's pregnancy (of about two years period), he had not contracted diti even once, personally. But he had been maintaining his earlier love affair with her illicitly with only himself, diti and his salesman Prasanta knowing about it. But hema's pregnancy gave him an opportunity to come near diti again and re-establish his fornicatory relations with her. Because, at the start of hema's pregnancy, her gynaecologist had warned him of having intercourse with her from day-one of the pregnancy till even a year after the delivery (if everything goes well) because of the damage it can do to her internal as well as external organs. Any normal person would have adjusted himself to this unpleasing wait of nearly twenty-two months. But hemanta, with all his lust couldn't wait for so much a time. So he restarted his illicit relations with diti on a physical plane. As mentioned earlier, he used his Sundays in supervising his electric-meter fittings works which are otherwise carried out by his business-partner. So he was left to meet diti in private in his two off-days of the week. But that wasn't possible as diti had her college-classes. For some days therefore, hemanta met her on the way during her return from college and indulged her to a tea and other costly edibles in the restaurants. As diti would be tired during those times, she would relish those teas and foodstuffs very much. But hemanta wasn't satisfied with such more outings together. He wanted something more! So he changed his duty of supervising his contracts to the off-days and decided to take diti out 'for a meal' during Sundays. For this rendezvous, she would phone to hemanta on his mobile phone (which was a novel and a fad during those days) from his shop (which still had the PCO as some

people would make calls through the subscriber Trunk Dialling or Simply STD process) which were toll-free for her by hemanta.

In this way restarted diti's and hemanta's illicit physical relationship which had broken down to the verbal level a few months before hemanta's marriage. Diti was pleased this time because as she had lost her virginity earlier, she knew she had nothing to lose now and also knew that the repercussions this time would be on hemanta as he is a married person now. Time went on in this way when one day hema complained of stomach aches. She had neared the completion of the ninth month of her pregnancy and so, upon inspecting her, her doctors told hemanta to admit her to the hospital. Naturally, as hemanta's parents were alive and in good health, they volunteered to keep company with hema in the hospital. But when the final labour pains began to show up and the doctor set a date for hema to be admitted to the labour room then hemanta hatched up a plan.

It had been earlier mentioned that on the night of hemanta's marriage and on the bus carrying the groom's party, diti and Prasanta H., the salesman of hemanta's alongwith some other youths had a great time by dancing merrily inside the bus. Unbeknownst to both of them, one of hemanta's friends who frequented hemanta's shop, who knew both diti and Prasanta and who also had happened to go with the groom's party that night, told hemanta of the incident in an objecting manner. Hemanta being clever didn't fly into a rage at once against his salesman nor said anything to diti. He thought of something deeper; something greater. So when there arose the necessity of a blood bank in the form of a donor, hemanta persuaded Prasanta to stay for the night in the hospital as there was no surety of finding a donor in the nick of time. And to make things congenial to prasanta, if congenial would be the right term here, he asked diti separately to be with his mother that night as his mother would be feeling lonely all alone in the hospital room. Diti consented to his request. But a day before the D-day he asked his parents not to go to the hospital on that day during the day, as he would act as the runner to the hospital on that day and also till the time when hema would return

from the hospital. So there needed a woman to keep the house and prepare the food for which his mother should stay at home. And as prasanta would be absent all day long, he asked his father to keep the shop for that day.

And so it went on as planned. At about midday of the fixed day, hema gave birth to a son. As no blood was needed for transfusion, hemanta told prasanta to go home but to appear at the hospital again after sunset as he have to keep company to hemanta's mother for the night's stay. Prasanta frowned as hemanta had not told him about the night's stay earlier but hemanta knew how to keep a grumbling man quiet and so presented prasanta with a hundred rupee note, a handsome amount for small occasions in those days. In the same way but separately, hemanta explained to diti that she was not needed from that time onwards but have to come at night to stay as a female attendant of hema, although hema due to her post-surgical condition was being kept in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for twenty four hours, and mayn't require any attendant on her. To bring some glees in her, he also gave her a hundred rupee note and told her that as his mother would be absent on that night, he would be keeping company with diti and so she could guess the fun they would be getting on that night. This promise made diti at once accede to his request. It was arranged that at about nine pm of that night, hemanta would pick-up diti from her home and bring her to the hospital with him. Correspondingly he told his mother that she have been given a rest on that night also as hema wouldn't be in her room for twenty four hours and so he and Prasanta would be in the hospital that night as hema's unrequited attendants.

But it was when, after hemanta and diti arrived at the hospital at night to stay together, arose the real dilemma. When diti entered the room, she felt a great shock for Prasanta was in the room and watching T.V. when she looked at hemanta with an interrogative glance than hemanta told her that his mother had an upsurge of her blood pressure and so he couldn't be sleeping in the hospital that night as his parents required his presence in his home that night. So he had requested

Prasanta to stay with her for that night. But diti, who was terribly angry by now, came out of the room and said: “who do you think you are when you are asking me to sleep in a room for a night with your salesman?”

Hemanta: “But please try to understand. I have to be in my home for my parents’ sake. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have called him and let you pass the night with him.”

Diti: “That doesn’t matter. I was in love with you and so had slept with you earlier. That of course doesn’t mean that I have to sleep with any other man. I’m not a call girl! Sorry, you take me back to my home. I cannot keep your request today.” Hemanta was clever! He knew he could manage diti through lies and money. So he said to her:

“Do you think you will be alone? Why, the doctors would be bringing hema from the ICU to her room (pointing to the room) at eleven O’clock tonight as twelve hours would be completed and she will be safe from all types of infections by then. If you are afraid as to how you can pass the time till then, then I propose to keep you company for one hour more. After that, I have to go as my parents will be waiting as you can guess.” Saying thus he groped for his wallet in his back pocket and bringing it out, opened it and took out a five hundred rupee note from it. He then gave it to diti saying:

“Here keep this! I give this to you as a present for keeping my word and to lighten up your mood for my not being able to keep company with you tonight.” Diti’s face at once glowed up and the anxious and angry look which could be seen in her face till a few moments earlier had totally vanished. She smiled a bit and said: “Well, it doesn’t matter, you see. You need not worry for me. I will keep myself safe. And yes, I will also look after my sister-in-law (meaning hemanta’s wife) as soon as she is transferred to this room.”

Five hundred rupees was a great amount of money in India about fifteen years earlier than the time when this story is written and hemanta also knew this. Being a salaried person and working in India’s largest Public Sector Oil Corporation, he had no dearth of money. He also knew how, when and to what amount money could be used to keep one

quiet or even make one do odd jobs. As diti was a college goer during those days, he knew that she would easily fall prey to that note that night and wouldn't even care to think why hemanta's wife was not brought at the appointed time to her room that night. After seeing her mellow at that moment, he bade goodbye from her and after giving out some instructions to Prasanta, he returned home, not even waiting for an hour with her as he had promised her prior to presenting her the money.

After hemanta returned from the hospital that night leaving diti and prasanta together in the room allotted to his wife, both diti and Prasanta waited for an hour or more for the return of hemanta's wife to her room by watching the TV provided in the room. But when hema was not brought to her room (from the ICU as assured by hemanta) both of them being too tired from that day's stay in the hospital and again, running to and fro to it from their homes, fell asleep in two separate beds. The next day both of them however failed to muster the courage to talk about it with hemanta because of their respective indefensible conditions of being 'bought' (by hemanta) the day earlier. Of course hemanta had a readymade reason as to why his wife was not brought to her room the earlier night as assured by him but both diti and Prasanta were in no mood to hear of hemanta's such excuses and so, returned to their respective homes as soon as they were freed the next morning. Hemanta also did not care if they believed in him or not as he was satisfied that he was successful in keeping diti and prasanta together in a room for one night.

After that notorious arrangement of a night, hemanta continued his amours with diti as earlier. But due to his lusty instincts, which had been mentioned earlier, he could not cool them altogether by associating himself with diti alone. He wanted some more sport. So he started searching for another female who would satisfy his lust. Soon, he found one in the form of Mrs. Das.

Mrs. Das was a married woman from lower Assam who worked in the same drilling site as hemanta as a sixth grade employee, cooking the food for the personnel working in that site and also cleaning the

establishment. She was educated although she choosed to work in that capacity. And, she was beautiful too. But it was not her beauty which brought hemanta towards her. As they say 'like attracts like' so too in the case of human relations, especially in the case of extra-marital relationships, this theory is very much operative. Again they say that women can control their passions more than men. But in the case of Mrs. Das, control was not an important thing as she was young and her husband living in his home in lower Assam where he worked in a department of the state Government. And as in the manner that required Mrs. Das to live from her husband, in the same way the condition of his absence necessitated her to indulge in same carnal sport just to 'pacify the undercurrents flowing inside her'. Sure, Mr. Das would come to see his wife every fortnight, but herein also a problem arose for, Mr. Das was a drunkard as well as in his middle ages-the former condition of which Mrs. Das wasn't aware of before her marriage-and so loved the bottle and the pseudo relaxation and excitement it provided more than the Union of the flesh provided. And another thing which paved the way for her to seek hemanta's love was the fact that in that site only hemanta was the youngest of all the men. All the rest were middle aged persons nearing or crossing fifty years of age! And as hemanta's mind searched for a companion who could give him enjoyment without the fear of marrying her, Mrs. Das' mind similarly rested on the young, energetic, and pleasure-loving hemanta.

The chemistry first started in the departmental bus by which hemanta and Mrs. Das would arrive and leave their workplace from the bus-stops designated for them. Cupid's arrows were shot from both sides and soon both were heels over head in love. And as in every extra-marital relationship the end-result is licentiousness so also in the love affair of hemanta and Mrs. Das, the satisfaction of each other's carnal desires at once followed after the initial acceptance of each other's smoochy proposals. Hemanta however faced one dilemma after he found Mrs. Das as his second un-official partner-that of time which originated from his fulfilment of such commitments to diti also. But his second off-day

matched with Mrs. Das' who had her Saturday and Sunday as off-days. So he dedicated the Saturday to be with Mrs. Das and the Sundays with diti, if possible. In this way hemanta carried on his lecherous activities with diti and also with Mrs. Das while at the same time maintaining his job and getting a good cut from his meter-fitting contract and his stationery shop. The proceeds from his shop was spent in paying and maintaining Prasanta H. while the dividend from his contracts was spent in managing diti and keeping her mouth shut. All in all he was very satisfied from all counts-by the manners of managing three women, running his family, keeping an employee and in addition to his job, that of managing two other businesses as well.

As hemanta was passing his time in this way, working, managing, enjoying and also earning, he lost count of the days and months that he was passing in this way. It was his wife hema, who one day reminded him that a few days hence his son will complete a year of his birth. She then slyly mooted the issue of celebrating his birthday and that too with a little splendour as it will be his first birthday. Hemanta agreed but also told her that he will be inviting his colleagues from his work site as he is also invited by them to their various celebrations. So when a few days later hemanta's son's first birthday was celebrated, hema got to be acquainted with Mrs. Das-her husband's second sleeping-partner, although she got no wind of hemanta's liaisons with her or even with Ms. Diti, who was also invited along with her family. She of course liked the slim and enticingly fit figure of Mrs. Das and also noticed a seducing look on her face. Of course she was naive enough to think that Mrs. Das would not be seducing her husband and even adored her husband a lot to not think that he would be cheating on her with Diti and Mrs. Das.

After about a month or two of celebrating his son's birthday hemanta was transferred to another rig, some twenty kilometres farther from the previous one but falling on the same route. This meant he couldn't meet Mrs. Das during his duty hours and also on the department bus as now he will have to go by another bus. He of course did not mind this but a different problem presented itself.

As hemanta was transferred, he was also promoted in his ranks. This also meant that his liabilities increased by a little. So, while he had the Sunday as a completely off day with the Saturday and Wednesday as off days between workdays earlier he had to attend work in his new site even on Sundays. So his off days shifted between two continuous work days followed by a rest day; then again two working days followed by a rest day. So if in a week he got a holiday in a Saturday, in another week on a Tuesday and so on. This meant he couldn't go to Mrs. Das and take diti also on every Saturday and Sunday. And so from now on he can play the cha-cha-cha in one week with only one woman at a time. He have to lie to both of them, he thought, and also to his wife now. With both Mrs. Das and diti, he became candid and told each one the same story-how much he was pressurized by time now and so he would be giving them fun greater than earlier in every fortnight but in a different manner. But only before his wife hema he told another story.

After hemanta's transfer to the farther rig, he continued his earlier pleasure seeking activities with diti and Mrs. Das laxly because of the lack of time. On the other hand, in the home front his restrictions with his wife was over and he could now enjoy his married life with her again. But the retreat of hema from hard labour during these two years made her gain a great amount of weight so much so that hemanta couldn't find the love and sensuality he had found in her earlier. So he couldn't give any attention to her now. So as a camouflage to his disinterests towards her, he suggested she do the shopping and take long walks. Hema of course liked his suggestion very much. So upon his advice, hema began to do the family shopping and this she would do willingly so that she would burn the fat off her body. In the meanwhile when Hemanta would be having a Saturday or a Sunday as his off-day which will coincide with Mrs. Das' off days, he would then come out of his house on 'special duty' in the morning and would return to his house late evening, as he would be normally returning during his morning shifts. This was because he can now meet Mrs. Das only on her off days

and not as earlier whenever he desired to meet her. This work of lying and cheating on the three women by hemanta went on for about a year when an incident happened.

Upon the advice of her husband, hema had for about a year been walking and also doing the shopping for her family. Sure, during the last one year or so of her such toiling with the shopping bag she shed off about ten kilos of her body weight. But even then she weighed a whopping seventy kilos which will put her into trouble once she reaches her middle years. So she continued with her new workout of shopping-cum-walking every two or three days a week. On the other hand hemanta, due to his inability to spend the night long in Mrs. Das' house as earlier, began to take her to the roadside hotels and resorts where he had taken diti earlier (and sometimes also in the present) as they would be secluded there and also in the surety that they may not be spotted there by anyone of their acquaintance as they might be when booking any hotel in the town. On one such occasion, hemanta finding that his off-day was also a Saturday, told hema that he had been entrusted a day shift duty and so would leave home at seven thirty in the morning and would return at about eight O'clock at night. And it was in the afternoon of that day that hema decided that as their cupboard was nearly empty and the following day was a Sunday when all the shops of the town would be closed so, she would shop for some items to last them for two to three days. With that intention in her mind, she went off to the market first for some vegetables and after which she thought she would purchase the groceries. On the other hand, hemanta and Mrs. Das, after having a round of cha-cha-cha followed by a lunch at a roadside resort, desired to return to Mrs. Das' quarter on that day a little earlier than usual as Mrs. Das' larder was also low on vegetables. In addition to that they wanted some meat and were planning a round or two of drinks at Mrs. Das' place in the evening. With this intent, they also entered the market to which hema had also come. Unbeknownst to both hemanta and hema in this way they with downward glances (for the vegetable vendors mostly sit on the floor with their produce) began to walk up and down the aisles of the

vegetable market, when in a moment of their 'too much' attention to the things they failed to notice each other and bumped each other by their bosoms but with heads downward. As each other raised their heads up to say 'sorry', both felt as if they had been hit on their heads by something heavy. Hema was the first to recover due to her cool demeanour and whispering a 'sorry' she went forward to the other vendor. But as it's always the 'thief' (literally) who is the most frightened and becomes the most nervous during such incidents so in that case it was hemanta who couldn't say anything at that time but only mumbled something inside his mouth. Of course Mrs. Das couldn't fathom what had happened and so freely did her shopping and also by going to a liquor shop beside the market, bought a small bottle of whiskey to drink and douse their fatigue of that day during the evening in her house.

However, hemanta was in no mood to drink and dance that night and so after gulping a peg of that whiskey without waiting to taste it, hurriedly came out of Mrs. Das' house. Although Mrs. Das couldn't fathom what was going on in hemanta mind, she dared not to ask him about it and let him go. After coming out of Mrs. Das' house hurriedly, hemanta entered a bar some half a km. from Mrs. Das' house and beside the main road. He required drinking that evening. Sure, there was wine and meat and even company in Mrs. Das' house. But he preferred to drink it alone because he knew that while drinking with Mrs. Das' company he may speak out what had happened to him that afternoon in the market. Here, he could reflect on what went wrong and could douse out the emotions arising out of such reflections alone without having any ear to share. After drinking a small bottle of whiskey to the full which took him a little more than an hour, he headed home. No words were shared between him and hema for a long time and when hemanta first broke the ice after a little difficulty, he only mumbled these words "I'm Sorry!" 'I'm Sorry!' Hema didn't say anything. But her eyes watered! She has experienced betrayal and letdown for the first time in her life. And due to her naive character, it was a blow too hard to dodge away. Even then, she controlled herself and not let her emotions overcome her.

It took some days for hema and hemanta to come to normal terms. Hemanta for some time decided not to go near either diti or Mrs. Das physically. However, he continued his telephonic conversations with both of them. As diti had no mobile phones till then, she used to call 'toll-free' from hemanta's PCO whenever she would find the time. Some six months were spent in this way. But although hemanta kept himself off his lecherous habits his another bad habit got the better of him this time. During any of his off days, in the evenings, he would come out of his house and in one of the numerous bars of the town wet his throat with wine. In this way, he thought he was cooling his passions which had been inflamed after he aroused them by keeping himself off his wife, diti and Mrs. Das. Then one day he got a call from diti who phoned to him to meet her even for half an hour for some serious talk. During that week, his work of two continuous days fell on the Saturday and the Sunday serially. His off-day will be the following Monday. Going by the Urgency in her tone, he decided to contact diti on that Monday. The best time would be when she would be returning from college.

Hemanta contacted diti on that Monday as she was coming out from college. He took her to a nearby restaurant frequented by lovers and over a cup of tea, decided to hear her urgent summons. As the teas were served, diti told him about her. It was like this:

Diti: "Definitely, you mayn't know why I called you today. And perhaps you have also forgotten that my classes will be over in a few days and the final exams will be held next month."

Hemanta thought that she was in need of some money and the exams are only an excuse from her for that money. So he said:

"I see! You could've asked me for some money directly. How much do you want?"

Diti: "You've guessed it wrong this time, hemanta da¹ I'm not in need of any money. It's such that my parents are contemplating marriage for me after my finals. That is why I called you."

¹ A suffix at the end of an elder male person's name denoting respect

Hemanta felt as if he would take out whatever money he had in his pocket and laying them out before diti, flee from the hotel at the same time. But he couldn't do so as he realised that the situation was graver than he had imagined. This would require long term thinking, intelligence, craft and tack. So he said after a little thought:

"Have they found any Benedict for you yet? I don't think you will be marrying before completing your graduation?"

Diti: "I don't want to because I want to earn something and stand on my own and also because I want to marry someone from this town so that I can live here happily forever! That was the reason I loved you and ..."
(her voice tailed off)

Hemanta understood! He recalled that he had promised diti at the time of his marriage that he will marry her off to another man. So she was trying to cash in on his promise. So he said: "You see it's not that easy. Marriage is based on luck! And even my wife is not of this town."

Diti: "But you had promised me. You played on my virginity. I believed you, had faith on you. And at last I consented because of your promises. Sooner or later I have to get married anyhow. And so I called you to discuss it together."

Hemanta was speechless for some time. Although no one was looking at him, he felt as if everyone inside the restaurant had heard him and were looking towards him. His nerves were getting at him and he perceived a 'creepy' feeling. He wanted to run out of the restaurant and from diti as fast as he can. But he realised at the same time that it was not that easy. He had placed himself into a cage from where he couldn't come out that easily. He now realised his foolishness of giving way to his lusts. He thought; even pondered for some time. Then he said: "Are you thinking of marriage from your side?"

Diti: "It depends! If I may score good marks in my majors then, I may study the master's course. Otherwise, I am thinking of earning some money myself before getting married."

Hemanta heaved a sigh of relief upon hearing this. This meant he will get some time to arrange something. He asked diti:

“In what works are you interested in?”

Diti: “Any Govt. job requiring graduates in humanities. Otherwise opening a beauty parlour on my own! I don’t prefer private jobs.”

Hemanta: “Have you talked about this to your parents yet?”

Diti: “Should I? I thought of discussing it with you first. In you, I have a person against whom I can always lean on.”

Hemanta’s heart sank a bit when he heard this. But mustering courage, he said:

“When your parents talk of your marriage next time, tell them the things you told me. And if they do not listen to you then intimate me. I’ll think what I can do.”

And so saying, after paying the bills, he returned home.

As said earlier, after his unintentional and unconscious bumping into his wife hema in the vegetable market, hemanta had resorted to drinking everyday which became a habit with him. Soon, he was addicted to it! But he was also young and his youthful flames had not completely died out till then. Although he had kept himself off from Mrs. Das and diti physically, his youth and his unbridled mind again pulled him towards them. So taking some extra precautions this time, he began to take Mrs. Das again outside the town for a round of cha-cha-cha or two, skirting the roads of the town as much as he can. He had also invited diti again but as her finals were near, she declined to this invitation.

After diti appeared in her finals, the issue of her marriage was again brought up in her house. This time, as instructed by hemanta, she told her parents that she would marry anyone from her hometown that would be willing to support diti pursue the occupation of her choice. Her parents agreed to her pre-conditions. She then presented before them the idea of opening a beauty parlour. But for this she has first to undergo a training of about six months which was also a little expensive. Her parents immediately declined against this proposal of hers saying that they have no question if she gets recruited in a Govt. department or corporation. Otherwise, it is marriage for her. This placed diti in a fix.

She didn't know what to do or say. So when she phoned to hemanta during her usual rounds, she also told about this to hemanta. By now, as hemanta had been in his job for more than a couple of years and had also seen one promotion, he had been receiving a good salary, thanks to this 'black gold' which is the major energy producer in India nowadays. And added to this, he has a crafty mind and knows how and when to spend this money for his own benefit. He at once decided to invest this money for diti. So he asked her to give him a list of the fees and expenses under this course in all the training institutes of their town. There were not many such institutes in this small town at that time and so in a couple of days, diti produced before him the list of three such institutes which required a fees of Rupees ten thousand, all inclusive, for their six months course, a pretty high amount in those days.

In the first week of the following month, diti got admitted under such an institute to learn the trade of beauty parlour through Hemanta's endowment to her. Of course her parents had questioned her as to the source of this money. But when she told them that it was provided by hemanta, they didn't mind as hemanta was like a family figure in their home and hemanta also owed her father a great deal due to the electrical-meter fitting contracts. Diti on her part assiduously learned this trade but when the course was finished after six months, she found herself in another dilemma; where to find the money to open a beauty parlour as her parents were against her learning this skill? But this time also hemanta came to her rescue. Sure being a shopkeeper himself at one time, he knew pretty well that opening a parlour, however small, is not easy financially. In spite of that fact, he ventured to open for diti a beauty parlour on the condition that if she makes any profit from it she should, in instalments, return it to hemanta till the money invested by him was recompensed. This was done by him, he told her, so that diti will be steadfast and professional in her work as he will be taking a loan from the bank to fund her enterprise. But in reality, he had sinister intentions.

There was an old empty masonry shopping structure with wooden doors of a dimension of about eighty square feet on the same

road where hemanta's own shop was but on the opposite side. Hemanta asked the owner to change the wooden doors of the shop to iron shutters as it will be safer and more secure. But his sinister intentions that were spoken of earlier have a connection to this shutter also. After this change over was done, hemanta leased that shop for five years with an amount of money also paid as security. Then, with diti's consultation and advice, he bought for her the furniture and fixture and the essential materials for one months' work. In due time with a small ceremony as per religious protocol, Diti opened her beauty parlour, a dream-come-true which she had been dreaming from a long time. But here a problem arose for diti; the shutter door of her shop was quite heavy and she hadn't anticipated this. But hemanta had a readymade solution to this problem-he told her (and all those present at the opening function) that for this diti has nothing to worry. For, he will instruct his shopkeeper prasanta to open diti's shutter everyday as soon as diti will arrive and bring it down for her at night when she will close shop. So that was it: Hemanta silencing diti from exposing his illicit relationship with her before his wife by investing her in learning a trade and then opening a parlour for her, all with his money. And as her present condition will disable her, even to a little extent to phone to him as she had done earlier so, he bought for her a second hand mobile phone so that she will not be required to use his PCO to phone to him again.

So it all went as diti had desired and hemanta had planned. On the other hand, hemanta continued his liaisons with both diti and Mrs. Das. In his home front, his wife hema's weight reduction endeavours came to a halt after her initial shedding-off of about ten kilos of her body weight through habit of walking to the market every two to three days a week. One reason for this was hemanta's aversion towards her in regard to physical pleasures. As mentioned above, he had already started his liaisons with diti and Mrs. Das; this left him ardour less for his wife. Coupled with that his more than moderate drinking and his increasing age increased that aversion in him! But he being clever, he used to taunt hema for her retardation in her weightlessness and blamed his

disinterest in her post-delivery initialled condition of large body mass and heavy body weight. Hemaa being naive believed hemanta's such caustic remarks. She even forgot the occasion of her bumping into him one afternoon in the market and so couldn't fathom that his disinterest in her is not in her body-mass and weight but in his seeking pleasure elsewhere. So, in addition to her walking to and from the market twice or even thrice a week, she thought of any other way to lessen her body weight and shrink her body-mass!

Opposite Hemanta's house lived a young lad of about twenty five years. He lived with his parents who are both lecturers in different colleges. He had a sibling who was younger than him. This lad whose real name was Ananda K. was an engineer (by his qualifications). Being unemployed he used to give tuitions and also used to appear in exams and interviews whenever any vacancy requiring engineers would crop up in any organisation. From about a year since, he had also started going to the gym. This had made him tough-looking and more handsome. After hemaa began to receive taunts from her husband regarding her mass and weight, she consulted Ananda K. about this. Ananda K. advised her to go to the gym which had already become a new fad for women of this part of the country at that time. Hemaa had seen women, both married and unmarried, going to the gym. But she was too shy to talk about it to hemanta or visit it on her own initiative. After she heard about it from Ananda and with an intention of reverting to her pre-marital physical condition, she at once accepted his suggestion. And seeing her initiative and her enthusiasms hemanta also agreed readily. And so started for hemaa a new schedule every day in addition to her of being a housewife, slimming up her body and bringing provisions for the family-going to the gym every day (except on Sundays).

In another sphere, hemanta lost his interest in diti and Mrs. Das. Lustful people are always like that-they move around seeking newer pastures. He of course could never shake off diti; his liaisons with her had cornered him on that front. But there were no such restrictions in Mrs. Das' front. So showing a busyness of duty and timelessness, he

began to move away from her. In his home front, his son had crossed three years of age and so was admitted into a preparatory school. And hema, after some months of slogging every six days of the week at the gym, had been able to shed off another five kilos of her body weight. Sure, she looked fat even then but, there could be seen a tautness in her flesh and skin which is noticeable and enticing to all her onlookers. Hemanta was also enamoured by her such changes. And without finding any new woman who would play to his tune of seductive moves, he turned his attention to hema instead this time. This change also made him drastically reduce his intake of alcohol during the evenings when he would be at home and also made him call hema over the phone from his workplace, more than he would do earlier, which sparked the otherwise dying flame inside hema's mind and made her see her world through a different perspective. She totally forgot about the incident of about two years earlier in the market which had caused a great chasm in her mind against her husband. Her married life began to see the colours again.

In another sphere, things were turning contrary for Prasanta H., the salesman of Hemanta. As mentioned earlier, he was given the charge of lifting up and bringing down the shutter-door of diti's beauty parlour on weekdays. He didn't mind it as it was the orders of his employer and, he had also met diti many a time in his shop and, had also danced and made great fun during their journey in hemanta's marriage as the groom's party. But as time went on and a few months had passed in this way, he began to hear lewd jibes from his neighbouring shopkeepers as well as those of diti's. And to make matters worse, on occasions where he had to return home early, he had to go to diti's shop and wait for her to tidy up her shop before closing for the night. Generally, diti's time of closure would coincide along with his and so by the time he would arrive at diti's shop, she would be ready to close hers. But on occasions which would appear spontaneously and without warnings he had to return home by about half an hour early. And on such occasions, when he would be sitting inside her shop, these lookers-on began to imagine stories and stir up gossips. As prasanta was not in love with diti and had no

inclinations towards her either, he complained this to his employer hemanta. Crafty hemanta pacified him by saying that these things are a part of the society's culture and requested him not to give any ear to such taunts and jibes as he was doing a lady a favour in addition to carrying out hemanta's order. On the other hand, he made a personal visit to diti's shop one day after this complaint by prasanta. He chose the time before half an hour of her closing as it was at such times that customers in her parlour are at the lowest. He then laid out diti's future plans for her. At first diti was angry on hemanta for trying to portray prasanta as her suitor as he had earlier committed on her to marry her off to a suitable boy as a substitute to his not marrying her. 'How can she get married to a boy of a caste lower than hers and also who works as a salesman in another's shop?' She simply couldn't hear hemanta saying to her such absurd things.

But hemanta was persistent! He knew that great things aren't possible in a day or two. He knew diti's position as vulnerable, both from her physical point of view and also on the point of her shop's liability before hemanta. When he saw that diti wouldn't budge from her stand of not even entertaining thoughts with Prasanta, he spoke out a very improbable lie! He told diti that if she marries Prasanta H. then, out of his love towards her and the obligations that he owes to her father for granting him the state electricity board's meter fitting contract for his town, he would try to engage Prasanta in any work befitting his academic qualifications whenever any vacancy would arise in his corporation. Naive diti thought it as true as she knew how her father had once favoured Hemanta in handing over the meter contracts which enabled hemanta to tide over his recessing post PCO days. So after some months of being persuaded with this lie, she began to cave in and gave an ear to his plans and proposals.

After his 'fitting and sealing' of diti in this way, he turned his attention to his salesman, Prasanta H. Prasanta had earlier vexed his irritation of been jibed and ridiculed by his as well as diti's fellow shopkeepers. Hinging himself on this complaint of Prasanta, Hemanta

told him to seek out employment elsewhere if he is finding it difficult to hear the taunts and jibes of his as well as diti's fellow shopkeepers. This came as a 'bolt from the blue' to Prasanta. He couldn't guess why his employer had said such a thing at that unearthly hour. Hemanta then reminded prasanta that he was very annoyed after receiving prasanta's complaints and that he was indeed lucky to have only to open and close the shutter (of diti's parlour) and do nothing more than that. In addition to that, he told him, as diti's father was a senior officer in the Electricity Board, attaching himself with diti in this way may prove beneficial to him as he may get recruited in some post of the Board through the good offices of diti's father in the near future. "But I'm not attached to her", prasanta told him after he heard hemanta telling him to get attached to diti. "You already are! Otherwise why would her neighbour-shopkeepers make fun of you? And you had also danced with her on my wedding night in front of everyone present, I hear?" Prasanta's mouth automatically gaped out after hearing this. He didn't know what to do or say. He only said, "How did you know?"

Hemanta: "I heard it after my marriage."

Prasanta: "But that doesn't mean I love her!"

Hemanta: "And you sometimes remain in her shop before closing? That is why her neighbouring shopkeepers are thinking thus about you, joining the facts. Well, whatever you do, it's up to you. I've only intimated you of my decision." Saying thus, he broke the conversation and came home.

Amid all these incidents of love and chance, an incident happened in hemanta's home front which changed hema's life and hemanta's home. In what could be called a 'Nature's Law' against all existences, hemanta's father one day suffered a high pressure stroke. He lay in a state of coma for four days and then died. The people of this part (of the country) observe a ritual after the death of their near and dear ones on the eleventh day of death. And on this day hemanta had also invited, along with his contemporary colleagues, his colleagues of the previous rig where he was working. And thus in this way, Mrs. Das also came to hemanta's house to attend his father's death ritual ceremony. As a

custom, hemanta introduced all his present and previous colleagues with his mother and his wife hema. And as Mrs. Das moved away from hema after greeting her with the normal introductory words, a question began to haunt hema all the time as to where had she seen that woman before? But due to the conditions of things on that day which required the attention of all the family members (of hemanta) to the occasion, she couldn't concentrate on it and let the matter lapse.

After things settled down in hemanta's house, hema resumed her earlier swimming exercises in the gym. In addition to that, she continued her earlier work of doing the marketing. And added to these, she had one more errand now which was to be carried out every day-that of dropping her son at his preparatory school half a km. from her house and bringing him back when the school ended. Of course 'dropping' is the inappropriate word here; the correct word is 'walking', which she used as another chance to bring down her weight. Except on Sundays, she would go to the gym every day. Here she would be helped in her workouts by Ananda K. who was much advanced than her in this department and who would also sometimes assist her in her workouts. In this way, a sort of physical intimacy (but not amounting to love) was brewed between hema and Ananda K. Ananda K. was younger than hema and was also energetic. In addition to that, through his long association with the gym and the exercises, his body had acquired a beautiful shape which could be seen only when he was unclothed. And so in the gym, hema began to see Ananda K.'s youthful figure which gave her delight to look at. But most of all she liked Ananda K.'s eyes which were very beautiful and bewitching. Earlier, prior to her joining the gym for getting slimmer she would stare at those eyes from the first floor veranda of her house and get immersed in them as if in a sort of trance. Now, after exercising at the gym along with him and being helped by him in her various exercises, she felt a great attachment to him (in addition to filling herself up in a sort of abstract pleasure, satisfaction and fulfilment which emanated in her after looking into those eyes at close range and hearing his instructions regarding the various workouts). Thus in the case of hema,

after being left out (literally) by hemanta in matters of the heart and the senses, she found a companion who gave her solace in both these areas.

After some months of blackmailing (that his work as a salesman would be terminated) and leaving him in the lurch, hemanta was able to coerce his salesman Prasanta H. into marrying diti hemanta's earlier love (and also his *partner lechery*). And to diti, without telling her that he had blackmailed prasanta, he told her simply but plainly that Prasanta had agreed to marry her. And as a future gift from him to her for going by his advice, he told diti that he will waive off all money that remains outstanding of the loan taken by him to open her parlour. After diti agreed to his disastrous scheme, he spread the word among his neighbouring shopkeepers that diti and Prasanta were in love and that they have agreed to marry each other. So after a few days, in addition to the jibes that prasanta had to hear from his neighbouring fellow shopkeepers and also the occasional ones which he and diti commonly hear from her neighbouring ones, he began to hear phrases like 'husband and wife', 'marriage round the corner' etc. Because in a small town rumours fly fast and so in a few days diti's fellow shopkeepers also heard that malicious rumour and so began to tease her also with such words when they would see prasanta coming to her shop to fulfil his owner's obligations to diti. On earlier occasions of such ridicule, prasanta had complained to hemanta. But now he, as he had agreed to marry diti without his ridiculers knowing about it, began to phone to diti on her mobile phone and would also pass time frequently in her shop on the plea of 'helping her in tidying up her shop before closing.' Soon the two were heels over head in love, brought together into the courtyard of cupid by circumstances, and been made to marry each other by a different agent through a very ugly sort of manipulation and treachery. This went on for about a month when they both, unable to control the 'pushes and pulls' of their youth and believing the treacherous but honeyed words of their employer and mentor, married each other through elopement.

Hemanta got to know of their elopement on that same night through his wife hema who told him that diti was missing. 'When on that

night, diti didn't go home and her parents found her mobile phone switched off, they came to her shop to inquire. Here they met some of her neighbouring shopkeepers loitering around who told them that they had seen her going in an auto rickshaw with the salesman of hemanta, after closing her shop. Her parents came to hemanta's house and made a hullaballo but, as hemanta was on duty, they returned home.' Hemanta acted fast after hearing this! He phoned to diti's father and gave him a false assurance that he will sue prasanta as soon as he can talk to him through diti and asked them not to lodge a complaint with the police. He then pleaded his ignorance on this matter but also advised them not to incorporate her into their family as some families do, as Prasanta was by caste a step lower than them. This at once enraged diti's parents and her father then and there contemplated that they will neither lodge a complaint with the police nor will they accept her but as a married daughter, if she repents and returns to them the following day. Having maliciously instructed them with such advice, hemanta made a call to diti on her mobile. As expected, her phone was switched off. He then left a message for her to miss a call to him whenever she would open her phone. Needless to say, she opened her phone only the following afternoon and so missed a call to hemanta after seeing his message. Hemanta assured her that as he had promised her beforehand, he has taken upon himself the responsibility of paying off his loan (to his bank) which he had availed to only finance diti's enterprise. He also asked her not to listen to any rumours and to abstain herself and prasanta from their respective workplaces for one month as he would be paying prasanta's salary for that month free (i.e. without prasanta coming to his shop). This done, he in the coming days, made an advertisement orally in lieu of diti for selling-off of her parlour without her knowing anything about it.

On the first of the next month, as had earlier been planned, prasanta reported to hemanta for work. But he also said that as his home was a good five kms. Or more from the town, it created problems for diti to come regularly to her parlour. So prasanta's family had decided that

diti wind up her business and work from her home in prasanta's village as a beautician. He then with a shy, downcast glance told hemanta that as they can never pay off the loan to hemanta in that condition so hemanta should sell off the parlour and do whatever he can to mitigate the loan. Crafty hemanta had comprehended it beforehand and that was why he had already advertised the selling-off of diti's parlour. But he told prasanta that even if he could not sell the parlour, as prasanta had carried out his advice in marrying diti, he will definitely pay off that loan all by himself. In this way, he created a false impression in Prasanta's mind that he was taking pity on prasanta's condition while in reality he was only following up on what he had promised to diti earlier.

Time moved on and Hemanta's son switched schools, after passing out of his preparatory school, to his kindergarten classes. As is the norm in the society nowadays-especially with the salaried class, he has also to be educated at home by a private tutor although there is nothing so hard in his curriculum that hema couldn't explain him. Hema on the other hand, in the company of Ananda K., had been carrying on her regular exercises which of course increased her fitness and her shape and figure to a great level. But even then she couldn't bring her weight down from sixty five kilos, a point at which she found herself 'moored' for some years without coming down. This of course created a problem for hemanta to regain his interests in her as this wasn't the case earlier when he had married her some years ago. And, diti's marriage to prasanta only compounded his problems in this regard although he was freed from his commitment to her in marrying her off to a well-established person. Of course he, upon a signal from her, carried out his telephonic love affairs with her when she would be alone in her house. But this didn't douse his flames of ardour which was rekindled after he cut down on his alcoholic drinks to bring himself near to hema. So as a revival to that programme, he began to take hema, in his scooter to the hotels and restaurants, both inside town and outside it, for a tea or even for a lunch, as he used to do earlier after his marriage. True, a year before his father's death, he had bought a new car but, for these

occasions and outings he selected the scooter as it gives both of them a greater chance of sight-seeing and will also, thought hemanta, rekindle their old memories.

Meanwhile, as discussed earlier, as per societal-protocol it was required of hemanta's son to get him engaged to a private tutor. As his son was small there was no question of him going to the tutor's house to study. So they began to search for a tutor who would come to their home to teach their son. They searched for some months, but didn't find any as it is not fruitful for any tutor to come to another's house for a single student. This was when Hema thought of Ananda K., her neighbour and her fitness training partner. Hemanta had no objections to this proposal of inviting Ananda K. to teach his son as Ananda was academically an engineer also. And so that was it; Ananda would come on all working days in the evening to teach hemanta's son as also he would be going in the afternoons to the gym (where he would meet hema and also helped her in her workout). And as for hemanta, he continued his recently started programme of sightseeing-cum-eating out with hema at least once a week to revive his lost romantic relations with her.

Time went on and with the changing times, things, situations and circumstances also changed. About a year into her marriage, diti got pregnant. As talked about in the supposed happening of similar cases with hemanta earlier, she approached him for money for this cause also. True, after her marriage with Prasanta as per the scheme of hemanta, she had been receiving a small amount of money every month due to the loss of her beautician business. But as Prasanta's income was not sufficient to properly run the house, her payolas by hemanta were also used up in running her household. And so as committed by hemanta to her earlier, he found himself funding her pregnancy expenses from the start to the finish. In the home front however, he could not regain his interest with hema, how much ever hard he tried. Sure, in trying to regain his intimacies with her, he got disconnected with his winey addictions. Even then during bedtime, perhaps seeing her big mass or

her lack of tact in starting up an amorous conversation, he would shrink from his resolve of enjoying a round of cha-cha-cha with her.

On the other hand hema would not mind hemanta not loving her or not even having fun with her, a prelude to love and sex in any relationship, as she would do earlier. And she has a very beautiful reason for it! The reason was that love was brewing between Ananda K. and her. Sure, while exercising in the same gym and being close neighbours Ananda K. would help hema in her various workouts as he was a little experienced than her in these matters. And it is also true that, prior to meeting Ananda every day at the gym, hema would glance at Ananda when he would be outside from her first floor veranda and look at his eyes continuously for some time when Ananda would not be looking at her or, by anyone in her neighbourhood. So much would she find his eyes so pacific and enchanting! In the gym, in front of all the prying eyes of the co-exercisers and due to the stench from their bodies, she would desist from looking at him. But when he would come in the evening to give classes to her son, then she would passively look at him and absorb the pleasure that would emanate from looking at the eyes of one (Ananda) who finds them pleasurable and solacing. A few days of her such acts and Ananda K. also came to know of her such weakness. But he feigned benightedness, not knowing if she was suffering from a whim or if it is really love-born and is actually in need of an amorous session or two. By and by, as the days went by and he perceived her gaze he decided to accept her overtures. Lovers know the eye language and in one glance from him one day, hema knew that their love has consummated. At first, they enjoyed each other's company and drank the nectar of love by talking to each other after hema's son's tutoring would be finished and Ananda would be requested for a cup of tea by her. But as the days went by and their love got cemented, Ananda began to give her a lift home from the gym. At first, this was slight as both of them were shy that someone would smell a rat of such associations. But as time passed, both of them became bolder and would be returning from the gym everyday in full view of the public. Lovers are shameless and

both hema and Ananda K. were perceived as lovers by everyone in the town who saw them returning from the gym everyday in Ananda's scooter. But it should be said with all frankness that, till this point their love was teen-like or puerile with nothing happening between them except looking at each other's eyes, sharing pleasant thoughts and coming home together from the gym. In due course of time hemanta and his mother also heard of this affair. But both didn't say anything to hema. His mother because, Ananda being their near neighbour and so she daren't speak anything against him! And hemanta because he himself was a party to such things earlier and so hadn't the moral courage to question hema on this.

Meanwhile, diti had moved into the seventh month of her pregnancy. From the sixth month onwards generally, there is seen a rush of such women to their doctors, an increase in their intake of required medicines and a necessity for rest. The monetary burden of all these was of course well absorbed by hemanta. Therefore sometimes, as prasanta had to take diti to the doctor's for a check-up which may require up to four to five hours of absence from his shop, hemanta would through a little adjustment with diti (over the phone), manage the shop. In this way he would pass his time working his job, overseeing the installation of electrical meters (whenever he would find the time) and keep his shop in the absence of Prasanta. This busyness kept his mind off from the usual vagaries it would have been facing following his coming-off from Mrs. Das and diti and, his physically-stale relationship with his wife hema. But he was more than a decade younger than his fiftieth birthday and so felt the tug of Adrenalin now and then when it would surface inside him.

During this time, another calamity struck hemanta. His mother died from heart failure. She was suffering from that illness for a long time and was under medications. But as she would have to move up and down the stairs of her house to the first floor where they lived, it took a toll on her heart. Hemanta was very grieved at this. And so as a mark of respect to her, he organised in a large way the rituals associated with dead people! To this he also invited Mrs. Das and all those who had

worked at that time in the drill site where he had first joined his work. Of course some of them have retired while one or two had died. Diti on the other hand could not come but her mother-in-law attended the ceremony while her husband prasanta, at the request of hemanta closed shop for two days and worked in the ritual ceremony instead during the day time. Death-ritual ceremonies in these parts of the country consists of a day of prayer and distribution of offerings followed by a feast the next day wherein are served fish or any other non-vegetarian food and wherein are invited only a selected number of guests. So it was on the prayer of the first day that most of the people had come which also included Mrs. Das, his earlier *dancing* partner. She of course looked enticingly beautiful on that day. But hemanta was also too busy with the ceremony on that day. And protocol also demanded that he kept away from women and anything that may seem vulgar or obscene on that day. But as Mrs. Das and her colleagues bade goodbye to hemanta and his wife, she out of a show of friendship and camaraderie gave hemanta a pat on his back before walking out. Although it was not common, nobody of course minded it but hema noticed it and took it a bit seriously. That night as she went to bed and was wrestling with herself to sleep, she tried hard to recall who that woman was who had on that day patted her husband on his back as she was coming out of the prayer ceremony. Surely she is one of his colleagues, she thought, but she also felt as if she had seen that woman before at close range once or twice. She tried hard to recall but tiredness and fatigue of the day got the better of her and she went to sleep. The next day, the household got up early for the short prayer-cum-feast which is generally held during the day. Prasanta also arrived at the appointed time. The feast was over by early afternoon and after everyone had departed save Prasanta and a few near neighbours, hemanta asked prasanta to stay with them for the night as he wanted a partner to 'clink the glasses'² that evening after those tedious eleven days, starting on the day of his mother's death. Prasanta being poor he didn't have the money to buy the liquor every day and was therefore overjoyed at the prospect

² I.e. say cheers-a term used by drinkers at the start of consuming alcoholic drinks

of drinking 'that' thing which brought pleasure to the mind. In addition to that, hemanta was also his employer and so he couldn't also turn down his request. So he obliged! In the evening, after Prasanta bought the bottles for hemanta, they both decided to consume it and enjoy the 'jerks' that it would present to 'the tipplers.' As they were into one or two rounds of it, prasanta enquired hemanta who that woman was who had patted hemanta's back the previous day when she and some other persons were begging leave from hemanta from his house. Now, those who have consumed whiskey even once in their lives know its capability in freeing the mind of its consumers by helping them perceive a feeling of relaxation. Hemanta, tired after all those eleven days of fasting and also by doing most of the errands himself, was already feeling the 'kickback' of this ancient drink. So he in a mood of joviality but utter carelessness blurted out: "Oh she? Why? She was Mrs. Das my previous colleague and one of my best friends; ... why she and I used to have a great time together, when on duty and also during my off days. I missed her a lot after I got transferred to my present rig. Even then often and on, I would phone to her to revive my past memories with her." Hema, who was appointed to serve them with water, snacks and salted fries, happened to come into that room with some salted fries. Like prasanta, she was also eager to know who that woman was and had also acknowledged to herself that she had seen that woman somewhere before, but not recalling where. And when she heard hemanta blurt out the above lines, she froze in the door way. 'So that woman was after all Mrs Das' she thought! And at that moment came to her mind the scene when after her marriage to hemanta she (hema) unbeknownst bumped into him in the vegetable market, unmindfully observed by Mrs. Das. That woman was with hemanta, her husband and after that 'bump', had followed her husband out of the bazaar although from her countenance hema could discern that she mightn't have been able to know the reason of hemanta's (Mrs. Das' lover's) instantaneous exit from the market after that 'bump'. And then when she heard the finishing

Words of his sentence 'I HAVEN'T MET ANY WOMAN FINER THAN HER IN MATTERS OF LOVE'; she instinctively knew how her husband's lack of interest in her began'. She coolly served them the 'fries' and came out of the room.

After that incident, things moved on as usual. Prasanta began attending his shopkeeper's duty but as diti's final month had also arrived, found himself absenting from work often. Hemanta would then keep his shop for Prasanta but this he couldn't do every time and so at times, he also had to leave his shop closed. He would of course, whenever found the time, take hema out on his earlier drive-outs to the restaurants and eateries out of the town to rekindle his lost-love with her. But although hema would pillion-ride on their scooter with hemanta on those occasions, she had lost all interest in reviving her lost love with hemanta. Sure, she also continued all her earlier duties like dropping and bringing home her son to-and-from school, going to the market two or three times a week by walking (to burn her fat), going to the gym every day (except on Sunday) to slim herself. But after she heard hemanta's confession of 'having a fine time with Mrs. Das,' in front of Prasanta, she just couldn't bring back her mind to hemanta. Instead she let it wander and rest on Ananda K. who seemed a little bolder now that her mother-in-law was no more. Sure, hema was not that type of woman who would cheat on her husband. But 'passionless neglect and not being loved by one's legitimate husband and similar situations and circumstances sometimes change the thoughts of some women and pave their road of a different journey'. This happened with hema also. Just as she had perceived a sense of audacity in Ananda K. after the death of her mother-in-law when he would come to give tuitions to her son, in the same manner she would feel freeness and audacity in talking with Ananda after he would finish his tuitions and would be served tea by her. Both would look into each other's eyes and would speak their hearts out during such times. True, they also meet each other in the gym every day and would also be returning home on Ananda's scooter every day. But 'such times are not the times of talking

and exchanging views of lovers.’ ‘Lovers need some solitariness’ and that solitariness was found in hemanta’s house in the evening.

About a month later, diti gave birth to a girl child. Due to Prasanta’s poverty the monthly rituals following the birth of the child was celebrated in a small manner. Sure, hemanta had offered diti some money to make it a big occasion. But as money was also required both to the mother and the child post delivery, she asked him to use that money later in stages. So he undertook to finance the food introduction ceremony of the baby which is observed after six months of such births. Six months went by quickly and then one day hemanta received a call from diti giving him a probabilistic date for the whole-food-introduction ceremony of her daughter and also, laid out the arrangements and the budget. Hemanta agreed to it as it occurred on a day when he will be having his day off. This meant he can attend the ceremony in the evening.

Meanwhile, after about a month of his mother’s death, he revived his programme with hema to rekindle his earlier physical touch with her. As said earlier, hema had already lost interest in hemanta after the Mrs. Das-patting hemanta’s-back incident. Even then she maintained a calm demeanour and began accompanying him in such adventures. Then an incident happened which completely put a barrier between hemanta and hema on the intimacy level and moved hema away from hemanta permanently, mentally and physically but not amounting to divorce. The incident which led to this condition was that hemanta had one day taken hema to a roadside inn for a lunch and also a round of probable cha-cha-cha preceding the lunch (if they can bring it together that time) as he had also earlier taken Mrs. Das and diti on such occasions but, separately. The inn was the one where he had gone with both of them earlier quite a number of times and so the manager and most of the ward boys had come to know hemanta quite well. On this occasion too they greeted hemanta when he entered the inn and gave him a cabin with a bed to rest. As hemanta ordered his mid day meal and a tea with light snacks immediately as a prelude to the cha-cha-cha, he got a phone call

from his organization. Naturally during such outings, he would switch off his common social number and would be leaving open the SIM which is used only for his work purpose. So as this was a work-related call, he came out of this cabin as soon as he received the call so as not to disturb hema through his work-related talks. It was from one of his seniors and as hemanta was briefing the senior about the crude-oil production happening on the previous day, it took him a couple of minutes by which time the ward boy arrived with the tea and snacks. Although hemanta was facing sideways to his cabin he was clearly seen by the ward boy as talking on the phone. As it was mentioned earlier from his visits to these hotels and inns from some years past, the managers and ward boys of these properties had come to know hemanta quite well. So on that day, either instructively or for some sinister reason, that ward boy who was bringing the ordered items, blurted out to hema, without any preamble as he was laying the things down: "it seems you are the third woman coming to our inn with this person. Of course, the other two did not wear vermilion marks on their scalps" (it must be noted here that no matter on how many number of times Mrs. Das came with hemanta to these various cha-cha-cha programmes, she did not wear the vermilion on her scalp nor wore the sari, the reasons were of course best known to her). Hema, who was reclining on the bed at that time, sprang up with a jerk when she heard that statement. "What did you say...? Are you sure?" She mumbled out. "Well, you see madam", replied the boy "I was present in this inn from the first time this person (referring to hemanta) had been visiting our inn. At first..." he cut off and at once came out of the room as he saw hemanta walking towards the room, not even waiting for the tip which hemanta as a customer would willingly be giving him. Hemanta of course could not guess what made the ward boy go out of the room so abruptly. But he didn't mind! He had come for enjoyment and so his mind was hinged on that enjoyment-programme. But he got a shock when he entered the room. He found hema getting up and trying to tidy-up by combing her hair and steadying her sari as if getting ready to depart. The snacks and the tea ordered by hemanta were at the table, unmoved.

Instinctively, he blurted out; “What’s this? Are you thinking of going somewhere? And, why haven’t you poured the tea yet?”

“I’m not in the mood of drinking tea or eating anything”, hema snapped. “And if you don’t mind, I think we should be moving out. I’m not feeling well”, she said. Hemanta couldn’t guess what the matter was. All he could say was that he had discerned something troubling in her face. He said, “But I’ve already ordered the midday meal and also paid the complete cost. It has lost me Rs. five hundred for this setup of only two hours (five hundred rupees was a good amount of money in India about ten to fifteen years back).” “Even then I have no desire of eating anything. And I am having a nauseating feeling. That’s why I want to go home. Let the money be wasted today”, hema said. Hemanta guessed the tone of hema’s words. ‘This woman otherwise silent and unvoiced rarely speaks in such a tone or manner,’ he thought. But he couldn’t guess what was disturbing her. Eventually, he ringed the ward boy and announced their departure from the inn.

No one between them spoke of this incident after reaching home that day. From the next day, life continued as usual; hemanta going to his job while hema to the school in the morning and to the gym in the afternoon. In between these things, she also would surf the internet in her mobile phone, a novel in those days. And during her such business in her mobile phone she one day instinctively typed these alphabets ‘ILU’ to Ananda K. in his number as an SMS. The results were drastic and dramatic. True, in her glances Ananda had perceived a weakness of the heart for him. And, while showing her the different rhythms of the exercises and while giving her a lift home, love had also developed between them. But after she sent that SMS she received an SMS from Ananda also which also read ‘ILU’. Her love with Ananda became confirmed.

From that day, hema felt a different kind of enthusiasm within her. She began to see her world as a new one. Following her shocking knowledge she received at the inn a couple of months earlier, she had lost interest in everything and had even contemplated ending her life.

Her loneliness in her house during the day following the death of hemanta's mother only fuelled up her such disastrous mentality. True, while serving tea to Ananda, after he would complete his tuitions every day, she would while serving him tea, gossip on useless topics by enjoining her eyes with him and drinking the intoxicating liquor of love emanating from his eyes. But from the moment she received that confirmatory SMS from him, her thoughts changed. She felt as if she would live-on, as if someone requires her to live-on in this world. So on the first evening of her getting the SMS from Ananda, as he was coming to her house to teach her son, she felt a palpitation and a shyness not perceived by her earlier. This is the 'Lover's Shyness' which every true lover perceives and it was perceived by Ananda also. So unlike the usual days when she would be ushering Ananda in, on that day she sent her son instead to open the door and usher Ananda in; such was her shyness before him on that day that not even for once could she muster the courage to step into the room where her son was studying as she used to do umpteen number of times on other days. In the case of Ananda that day, by not seeing her till the ending of his class (and also not perceiving her shyness) his heart thumped and his mind became perplexed. But he maintained his composure! But as he finished his class and was about to exit through the front door, he heard the subtle voice of hema calling from the kitchen door: "please wait; don't go. Have a tea". The words sounded like music in Ananda's ears. With a lover's shyness he drank the tea that evening and went away. But from the following day started between him and hema a love which very few people have seen or heard about! It was of course not physical because true love need not be physical. But it was love of the highest order in that it produced a sort of pacification and solace in both their minds and made them feel as if belonging to each other. This continued for some months without anyone getting any wind of it.

As mentioned earlier, diti's daughter's food introduction ceremony was planned to be hosted in a differently great way as her monthly ritual birth ceremony was not observed earlier. For this ceremony, hemanta

had also promised to help diti financially. So after a due consultation with hemanta regarding the date, a day was selected to be observed on which hemanta would have his day off, so that he can pass the whole day on that occasion. So when that occasion arrived, hemanta and hema, after seeing off their son to school, came up to diti's house to attend the food introduction ceremony. A small ritual was observed following which rice and other items (in miniscule quantities) were given to the child to be eaten. As he was their supposedly chief guest (chief financer), both prasanta and diti requested hemanta and his wife to take their evening meals also in diti's house as some selective guests would be arriving in the evening only. So in the evening hemanta and hema returned bringing their son with them this time. Of course, in the evening wine was also served among the guests and so hemanta left hema among the minuscule guests to partake of some pegs of brandy. Now it so happened that the owner of the inn to which hemanta and hema had gone for a meal and change of location a few months previously and where hema had learned about hemanta's misdeeds, had his home in the same village as prasanta's. And as an invitee, he had also come to prasanta's house that evening. As he was coming out from the room to the pandal, hema could see that his gait was uneven and so knew that he was drunk. Nevertheless she did not say anything nor showed any displeasure when the man seated himself next to her in the pandal. After some moments of silence, the person introduced himself. From his tone, one couldn't say that he was drunk but that was discernable because his business was related to wine which hema discovered sooner. That person to hema: "I know you don't know me, madam. I introduce myself as the manager-cum-owner of an inn to which you have visited many a times earlier".

Hema; "I don't remember! Are you saying your inn? I haven't seen you even once, I think."

"That is true", said the man. "From the point where guests park their vehicles and from the main hallway, I couldn't be seen. But where I sit, I overlook each and every customer coming to and leaving from my hotel", the man said.

So that is it, hema thought. But which one, she was inquisitive to know. So she asked him about it.

“That one, the one beside the highway which has a big courtyard and where you had gone with your husband a few months earlier and after which I haven’t seen either you or your husband again. Why have you two stopped going there? Does it have to do with our food or our service or any other thing? As a matter of fact, your husband had been visiting my inn quite a few years before he took you there, with other women of course. One of them is this woman whom Prasanta has married and whose daughter’s food introduction ceremony we are attending.”

Hemaa felt as if her heart had missed a beat upon hearing this. So diti was one of the other two women spoken of by the ward boy of that inn. She had no doubt that the other woman was Mrs. Das. This man was drunk surely, she thought, but he was not babbling out of his drunkenness as his words also matched the words of his ward boy some months previously. A great surge of revenge came to her mind and grasped her. But she kept her cool. She feigned a smile at the man and replied “Is it so? I didn’t know! Thank you for saying” and looked the other way so that the man would desist from talking. She just doesn’t need to hear any more. She had had enough that day. After an hour or two she along with hemanta and her son returned home. Hemanta of course got a little drunk but could bring them safely by the car that night. Hemaa didn’t speak about her information to him that night or on the next day. On the next day, hemanta was having the night shift for two days continuously. So he was at home till four O’clock in the afternoon. So on the first day, he decided to open the shop as prasanta was busy in his home after the ceremony of the previous day. After hemaa sent her son to school, hemanta heard her speak to someone on the phone like “you can come at about 10 am. After she finished talking hemanta asked her whom she was calling and why “Oh, it’s Ananda. I called him just to show me a free hand exercise which I have not been able to do yet.” “But you go to the gym every day. Why don’t you do it there?” asked hemanta.

“But I feel shy of the instructor to help me in such movements. Besides, with Ananda, I’m much free in these matters.” “Is Ananda coming then?” asked hemanta. “Oh! Sure, he’s always ready to help” said hema. “In that case I’m also staying till Ananda leaves” Hemanta said. “But you need not stay” said hema. “Don’t you remember that I hadn’t followed you when you took Diti and Mrs. Das separately to the inn from which we had returned abruptly some months previously? I only wish that you don’t interfere in my fancies and works as I hadn’t interfered in yours too.”

Hemanta said nothing and calmly came out of the house without taking the keys of the shop. No! He wouldn’t open shop on that day. Nor does he require to. All he wished was a bottle or two of brandy to soothe his nerves before going to his work. He recalled Mrs. Das. Perhaps he would request his senior to get him transferred to her site once more. He could guess how Ananda was feeling but couldn’t even turn towards his house to see if he is at home or not. He just does not have the courage to do so. Nor does he care if any ‘Paramananda’³ comes to his house after the departure of Ananda K. His heart just can’t conceive of such charges against them: such are the ways of the world!

³ A Hindu term for God!